MIRACLE

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Mark 5: 21-43

“your faith has made you well; go in peace”

(Mark 5:34)

It is a harrowing moment when a child is desperately ill and no one can seem to

do anything about it. I will never forget my mother's life-long grief for two red-headed sisters she lost in the great influenza epidemic in her childhood in the early part of the century; Mary—a teenager, and the baby—Betty—both gone for decades, but she never forgot them or family's feeling of desperate helplessness.

When his daughter became critically ill, Frederick Buechner learned about the limits of his parental power and authority.

“What happened was that (she) stopped eating. There was nothing scary about it at first . . just the sort of thing any girl who thought she’d be prettier if she lost a few pounds might do . . . But then as months went by it did become scary. Anorexia nervosa is the name of the sickness she was suffering from.”

There was nothing he could do—no argument, no warning or pleading, no cajolery or bribing would make her start eating.

Psychiatrists told him he could not cure her—that the best thing he could do for

her was to stop trying to do anything. It was very difficult. "The only way I knew to be a father was to take care of her—to move heaven and earth to make her well, and of course, I couldn't do that. I didn't have either the wisdom or the power to make her well." (*Telling Secrets,* A Memoir, p. 23-26)

When a child is gravely ill and no one can seem to do anything, it is a defining moment. And so who can't understand the father who runs to Jesus because his 12-year-old daughter is dying? His name is Jairus. He is an important man,

a leader in the synagogue. He has access to the best medical resources available. He has no doubt tried them all and his daughter is dying. So it is a desperate man who runs to this healer from Capernaum whose reputation is spreading far and wide throughout Galilee, runs and throws himself at Jesus' feet—which itself must have been quite an event, this dignified, respected community leader,

groveling at the feet of a carpenter's son from Nazareth, of all places —"begging repeatedly—My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live."

Without a word, Jesus went with him— the large crowd of the curious who had witnessed this dramatic encounter, following along to see what would happen next.

What happens next is an interruption—an unwelcome interruption almost from anybody's point of view.
You want to say to this woman, "Can't you see he's busy, in a hurry? A little girl is dying and he has to get to her quickly. Surely you understand. Surely you can wait."

The late Henri Nouwen told a wonderful story of a distinguished Notre Dame Professor with whom Nouwen was residing. The older teacher said to Nouwen, "You know, my whole life I have been complaining that my work

was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work." (*Reaching Out,* p. 36)

It's not only an inopportune, untimely interruption, it is terribly inappropriate, offensive even. A woman who had suffered from hemorrhages—bleeding—for twelve years, sneaked up behind him and touched his cloak. Modern physicians flinch at the way she is described, although their patients sometimes love it. "She had endured much under many physicians and had

spent all that she had, and she was no better, but rather grew worse."

Now there's a big problem brewing here that we miss sometimes. That woman's physical condition had earned her the religious designation "unclean."

She was believed to be impure, because of her bleeding. Because it never stopped, she could not engage in the monthly purification rites required by all Jewish women. So she was permanently "unclean," not allowed to be in the synagogue, to participate in any religious rituals; she was not married, lived alone—was looked down on, ostracized, marginalized, isolated, alienated—a kind of ultimate outsider.

Listen to how feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Reuther describes her: "Jewish law regarded a woman

with a flow of blood as unclean and polluting anyone else she touched. Jesus' reaction to the woman shows his deliberate discarding of the taboo, while the woman's own terror at being discovered in touching his garment reveals her awareness at violating the taboo." (*New Woman, New Earth,* p. 64)

That's why she is so surreptitious—sneaking up out of the crowd from behind, reaching out to touch his robe. And it worked. The bleeding stopped—but somehow Jesus knew something had

happened and asked, “Who touched me?”

We’ve almost forgotten that there is an important mission underway. He was hurrying to the bedside of a dying 12-year-old. Her father is frantic—even the disciples are impatient as he takes his time, talks to the woman who by now, having been discovered, is cowering at his feet. “Daughter,” he says—my guess is no one has called her that or any term of endearment for at least twelve years —“Daughter,” he says, “your faith has

made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

The emerging problem is that he is not only late—in fact too late—he's also now unclean. He has been touched by this unclean woman. The law is clear. He must stop what he is doing, take all his clothes off, bathe, wash his clothes and withdraw from all human contact until sundown. He is officially unclean—contagious—he is not supposed to touch anyone.

And instead of complying with his religion's rules and regulations, he sets

out once again for Jairus's house—an unclean healer—a wounded healer, to use Henri Nouwen's lovely phrase—to the most ritually fastidious, religiously correct household of the leader of the local synagogue. Messengers have come with the worst possible news. He's too late. The little girl is dead. Maybe spending time unnecessarily with the woman back there has made him too late.

Friends, family, neighbors have already begun the ritualized mourning practices, keening, weeping, wailing—like

newspaper pictures of the mothers of dead Palestinian or Israeli soldiers.

What happens next will not submit to the intellectual analysis that is our western way of thinking. We have to ask, “Did it really happen? Did that dead little girl get up? Was she really dead? How did it happen?”

And we could simply stop right here and spend the rest of this sermon on that.

There are many who attribute to the Bible historical, factual accuracy. If it says it, it happened. There are those who say it didn't happen because things like that can't happen. And there are many of us who are willing to say we don't know what happened—that dead girls don't ordinarily get up and walk, although modern medicine is causing us to be a lot less sure of ourselves: that to believe in God is to believe in the possibility of the unusual, the

extraordinary, the miraculous, if you will, but that all of that quite misses the point, as he himself seemed to understand with his consistent instructions to his disciples not to broadcast these extraordinary events. Something stunning happened that day, and we believe that the account of what happened contains something of the miracle of it, a Word from God. So the real question is not did it happen just like that, but what is God saying to us, to me, in this story?

They laughed at him. He took the child's parents, mother and father, into that sad, dark room. He took her by the hand. His parents would have been stunned by that. That, too, by the way, is against the law. If she's dead, she's as unclean as the bleeding woman back there, but Jesus has already polluted himself. So he lifts up her lifeless body and says something affectionate—intimate. Curiously, Mark gives it to us not in the Greek with which he's writing this story, but the Aramaic Jesus spoke. ***Talitha, cum.*** **"Little girl—little lamb,"**

actually, “get up!” And she got up. And Jesus said, “give her something to eat.”

Jesus continues to disregard and intentionally disobey religious rules and regulations that divide the human race into insiders and outsiders. Jesus continues to disregard and deliberately disobey strict religious orthodoxy that excludes men and women from the community because of their uncleanness,
their physical condition, their moral rectitude even. This is nothing less than a revolutionary, alternate social vision.

In the first few chapters of Mark, Jesus is sweeping into God's kingdom, inviting to the banquet table, all sorts of people who were not included, intentionally excluded by religion—unclean people, morally suspect people, sinners. And we cannot miss the irony. Those who are most threatened by this alternate theological and social vision and therefore who oppose it—and will kill him rather than compromise—are those who are most devout, most passionate about their own moral and theological and liturgical purity. It is clearly the point he is making day in and day out—

with people who have leprosy, paralysis, sinners, hemorrhaging women, dead little girls. There is no human condition so bad—so marginal that hope is absent. There is no human condition, even death, that is outside the reach of God's love. It is a vision of human wholeness, unity, harmony, community and peace. It is a compelling vision to which he is inviting his followers. It is called the Kingdom of God.

It is difficult to preach this sermon and not ask whether His followers, His church today, hears Him and

understands the radical inclusivity of the Kingdom of God as He described it and lived it. It is difficult not to want the whole enterprise to apologize—as Pope Paul II did a few weeks ago in Rome—get down on its knees and apologize for so grossly missing the point.

It is difficult not to say again that the mission of His church is not to preserve its purity but to risk its purity and theological orthodoxy and doctrinal correctness by reaching out to welcome all and to show the world a picture of

God's kingdom where there are no outsiders, unclean, marginalized.

But there is another word here—the word is miracle. Her physician would today prescribe medication that would cure that woman almost immediately—and to her it would have been astonishing. And in some Dubuque or Chicago hospital today a patient's heart will stop and breathing cease and there will be a code blue and emergency drugs will be injected, perhaps directly into the heart, and perhaps electric shock, and the heart will resume beating and

lungs will fill with air and eyes flutter open and a woman or man or child will be alive again and no doubt, eat a little food. So part of what a miracle is depends on when you are living and where. But maybe there is something deeper and more important here than physical healing even.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in what I think is a particularly eloquent description, says that every miracle is "like a hole poked in the opaque fabric of time and space. The kingdom breaks through and for a moment in time we see how things will

be or how they are in the mind of God and then it is over . . .The problem with miracles," Taylor says, is that "it's hard to witness them without wanting one of your own." (*Bread of Angels,* p. 136-137)

Another problem with miracles is that people who need them and pray for them don't always get them.
Two weeks ago *The Chicago Tribune* carried an article "Teen's Illness Tests Faith on her Campus," about 18 year old Kaia Jergensen, a student and athlete at an evangelical Christian college who contracted a particularly severe form of

meningitis. Her family asked her fellow students to pray for her and they did, fervently. Students organized an around the clock prayer vigil—so that at least one person was praying for Kaia at all times. The students, “mindful of biblical references to the power of prayer, expected results.

I wanted to see Kaia wake up, be healed and walk out of the hospital,” said Chris Helms, 20, who had the 4:40 a.m. shift. “I prayed that I’d one day see her running on the basketball court again.”

A week after the vigil, surgeons amputated both of Kaia's legs—her situation remained critical. Her fellow students' faith was shaken. The organizer of the prayer vigil was crushed. "It shook our faith," he said. A professor said, "now they have to reconsider. They used to think they were in control of their life. They have had to come to terms with the fact that they aren't." (*Chicago Tribune, 3/10/00)*

The prayer vigil is on, but the petitions are different now. The students are learning about faith. Faith is believing

when there are no miracles. Faith is trusting God when our fervent requests are not met. Faith is bold asking and then trusting when we do not get what we asked for. Faith is trusting God with our lives regardless of what happens.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote: "Did Jairus have faith? Mark never said so. He just followed Jesus home and watched that unclean holy man do his work.
Either way, the high point was not then but earlier, when Jesus told him, 'Do not fear, only believe.' If Jairus was able to do that, then he would have survived

whatever happened next, even if Jesus had walked into his daughter's room, closed her eyes with his fingertips and pulled the sheet over her head. Her father's belief would have been the miracle at that point, his willingness to trust that she was still in God's good hands, even though she had slipped out of his." (p. 139, op.cit.)

The miracle is that God has come to us in this one, this wounded healer, who reaches across all the barriers to touch and love and include those who are lost and isolated and sick—even those who

are dying. The miracle, which Lent quietly observes, is the miracle of God's love for all of us—the people in the story, but also for you, me and for those we hold dear. The invitation is to participate in that miracle, to trust that love which will never let us go.

Thanks be to God.